

Reviews

Wexler, Paul. *Silk Road Linguistics: The Birth of Yiddish and the Multiethnic Jewish Peoples on the Silk Roads, 9–13th Centuries. The Indispensable Role of the Arabs, Chinese, Germans, Iranians, Slavs and Turks*. Studies in Arabic Language and Literature, 10. Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2021. Notes. References. Bibliography. Glossary. Indexes. Addenda. xvi + 1412 pp. €198.00 (2-volume hardback and e-book).

THIS ground-breaking, encyclopaedic monograph is a fitting crown to interdisciplinary historical sociolinguist Paul Wexler's research career of over six decades that brought him from the United States to Peru and Bolivia, Israel, Central and Eastern Europe, Nigeria, Japan, and recently to Australia. Traditionally-minded historians and linguists consider Wexler an iconoclast, because he dares to cross disciplinary lines and proposes novel hypotheses on the basis of new evidence and critical re-examinations of earlier finds. Thus far, his main claim to fame has been the theory that Yiddish is a Slavic language (Knaanic, or Judeo-Slavic), that in the late medieval and early modern periods was relexicalized with Germanic words (*Explorations in Judeo-Slavic Linguistics*, Leiden 1987), not unlike academic English, which is a Germanic tongue heavily relexicalized with Romance (that is, French and Latin) words. On this basis, Wexler came to the conclusion that Ivrit (Modern Hebrew) is none other than Yiddish relexicalized with Semitic words. As such, Ivrit is also a Slavic language, but twice removed from the medieval Knaanic's dialectal (Sorbian) base in Lusatia (or today's eastern Germany) (see Paul Wexler, *The Schizoid Nature of Modern Hebrew: A Slavic Language in Search of a Semitic Past*, Wiesbaden, 1990). What prevented a calm discussion of Wexler's theory are the two socio-political norms, developed in Europe, that currently underlie the state and intellectual structures of Western-style modernity. The conclusion of the Thirty Years' War (1648) yielded the model of the confessionally homogenous territorial state, which in turn spawned the nation-state. In Central Europe, especially, following the Great War (1918), the ethnolinguistically homogenous nation-state became the standard model of legitimate statehood. Until the Holocaust, most of the world's Jews lived in this region. Under these normative influences, they began to see themselves as a mono-ethnic people (nation) created and confessionally united by Judaism. The Nazi genocide of Jews imbued this understanding with a racialized (biologizing) undertone which brushed off onto the new secular definition of Jewishness, as adopted in Israel. In addition, the polity is none other than a Central European ethnolinguistic nation-state located in the Middle East, with Ivrit having the function of its national language.

Wexler's theories and findings roam freely across the length and breadth of Eurasia and North Africa and often contradict these recent political norms,

much to various ideologues' displeasure. The *opus magnum* under review emerged late during the first decade of the twenty-first century from Wexler's attempt to plug the gap in scholarship with a sorely missing etymological dictionary of Yiddish (p. 21). He soon realized that such a dictionary had not been attempted earlier because the origins of common Yiddish words push lexicographers toward Slavic and other languages, well beyond German, with which Yiddish is traditionally coupled on cultural and ideological grounds (despite the fact that the Holocaust was planned and carried out by Germans). Early into the project, Wexler realized that he would not be able to do justice to the task because influences, be it on Knaanic, Yiddish or other Jewish languages that then fed into modern Yiddish (and Ivrit), touch upon too many ethnolinguistic and confessional groups strewn across Eurasia (including North Africa) during the past two millennia. Each linguistically- and historiographically-evidenced answer to an etymological issue tended to generate more questions that also needed to be looked into. In turn, his expansive work centres on the discussion and dictionary-style presentation of the origins and relations of almost 300 lexemes (or their groups), termed 'Afro-Eurasian elements in Yiddish' (pp. 225–989). This almost 800-page-long dictionary (requiring the compilation of a separate index of examples employed [pp. 1304–1410]) constitutes the most extensive prolegomena to a future Yiddish etymological dictionary thus far. Given the unprecedented scope of comparisons and evidence, the explication of which involves coverage of a huge number of languages and ethnic groups, Wexler had to come up with new terminology (pp. 39–44), novel manners of sorting the data gathered (pp. 225–37), alongside the annotated glossaries of ethnic groups, authors and concepts (pp. 1231–82), as well as languages (pp. 1283–304). The book's highly multilingual bibliography (pp. 1097–230) is proof of this unprecedented effort and its scope, while the Addendum (pp. 1410–12) and the completed manuscript of *An Etymological Dictionary of Iranianized Slavic Yiddish* (p. 1224) that awaits publication show that Wexler has no plans to ease up on this much needed research. He is uniquely equipped to face up to the challenge, also thanks to his command of Slavic and other Central European languages, in addition to Yiddish, Hebrew, Spanyol, Knaanic and lesser-known Jewish languages. Such a mixture of linguistic skills is rare nowadays, after the Nazi erasure of Central Europe's millennium-old Yiddish speech community. What is more, Wexler has walked the proverbial extra mile by accessing material in numerous other Asian and African languages, thanks to his readiness to cooperate with specialists in these areas.

Wexler clearly realizes that languages are creations of humans and their groups. Hence, claims of linguistic influences on Yiddish must be supported with historical, archaeological and other evidence (pp. 45–224) to establish their validity. This study results in an illuminating synthesis of historical and

linguistic findings (pp. 992–1096), including recent insights from population genetics (p. 1048). Collaboration between scholars (and scientists) of different disciplines and ethno-geographic areas is a must, as amply attested by Wexler's fruitful involvement with geneticists (see Ranajit Das, Paul Wexler, Mehdi Pirooznia and Eran Elhaik, 'The Origins of Ashkenaz, Ashkenazic Jews, and Yiddish', *Frontiers of Genetics*, 2017 <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fgene.2017.00087>>). The book's overarching conclusion is compelling. In the first millennium, the majority of the world's Jews (Judaists) lived in the Persian Empire (pp. 77–95). They constituted a confessionally-delimited lucrative guild of merchants, which in the second half of the first millennium built and maintained a vast network of trade routes that extended from China to the westernmost reaches of the Islamic Caliphate in today's Morocco and Iberia, with branch routes covering all of Europe, much of West Africa, the Horn of Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and at least some of Northern Asia. These merchants are known as 'Radhanites', because their homeland was Radhan, or a region in central Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq). Judaism was not and is not a proselytizing religion. Yet, those who wanted to join the guild needed to adopt Judaism. As a result, the Jews became a multi-ethnic — Eurasian-North African — people, while the strictures of their business activities required developing 'secret' languages (including forerunners of Yiddish) that only fellow Radhanites would understand. The network collapsed in the thirteenth century, following the explosive (and initially highly destructive) expansion of the Mongol Empire. Yet, these trade routes (or a selection of them, as associated with the Khazar Empire) probably stood behind the 'sudden' appearance of Jews in late medieval Central Europe, where Yiddish developed (pp. 96–121).

This illuminating, polyphonic monograph exemplifies the promise of interdisciplinary 'Silk Road' (that is, Eurasian-cum-African) studies. It is destined to become an oft-cited cornerstone of Eurasian studies as a growing field of scholarly (and even scientific) inquiry.

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Sobol, Valeria. *Haunted Empire: Gothic and the Russian Imperial Uncanny*. NIU Series in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. Northern Illinois University Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2020. xi + 198 pp. Map. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$49.95.

VALERIA SOBOL's closely researched, absorbingly written monograph turns a long-awaited Gothic lens on Russian and Ukrainian literature of the Romantic era, complementing several shorter recent studies by Svitlana Krysz and Robert